The Wild Swans at Coole

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Dominant Effect:

In *The Wild Swans at Coole*, William Butler Yeats uses imagery and symbolizes swans as the woman he loves, to further his message that beauty is timeless, reminding him of his unrequited love.
Context

- Place called Coole Park
- Used to belong to a woman named Lady Gregory
- Yeats visited Lady Gregory

- Related to Yeats’ own life
  - Love for Maud Gonne
- Swan is a symbol for the woman he loves
- Poem is a lamentation for his unrequited love.
Themes

Nature
- “The trees are in their autumn beauty” (1)
- “Upon the brimming water among the stones/Are nine-and-fifty swans” (5-6)
  - Prominent in the poem
  - Compares himself to the environment around him

Sadness
- “I have looked upon those brilliant creatures/And now my heart is sore.” 13-14)
  - Not pleased with the changes that were occurring in his life
More Themes

✦ Old Age and Death
  ○ “All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight” (15)
    ○ Reminded him of his age
    ○ Should act on his loneliness

✦ Love and Time
  ○ “When?”
  ○ Lyric poem = a poem that expresses personal emotions/feelings, typically in first person
The Swans

- Symbolize woman he loves
- Diction
- Timelessness and beauty
  - Sedentary Motif
  - Don’t age
- “nine-and-fifty swans” (6)
  - Sense of loneliness as odd number of swans
  - One odd swan is the speaker

“Great broken rings”
“Clamorous wings”
“Brilliant creatures”
“Unwearied”
“Companionable”
“Passion or conquest”
“Mysterious, beautiful”
The swans never change/age, unlike the speaker. Ageing is juxtaposed. "I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,/And now my heart is sore" (13-14). As people age, we’re more conscious of pain, death, sadness, and change—it makes us "sore" and weary. Tone: reminiscent sadness.

Diction:
- “Mirrors a still sky” (4)
- “Unwearied still, lover by lover” (19)
- “Attend upon them still” (24)
- “But now they drift on the still water” (25)
“The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count; I saw, before I had well finished, All suddenly mount” (7-9)

**Shift;** Yeats begins to realize the progression of time, swans become an active centerpiece of the poem, representing timelessness and beauty of youth
More Nature (and Water) Imagery

“Under the October twilight the water / Mirrors a still sky” (3-4).

+ Autumn imagery → colder mood
  - Reflects on emptiness
  - Peace and permanence
  - Shift: Calm mood v. sudden flight of swans
  - Onomatopoeia: “clamorous wings” (Line 12)

+ Water imagery
  - Reflection of the infinite sky
  - Literal reflection and mental reflection
Dry Imagery

+ “The trees are in their autumn beauty, The woodland paths are dry” (1-2)
+ While the lake is symbolizing life and abundance, the area of the poet is dominated by dryness and autumn
+ Symbolize the passing through time
+ For him, everything changes and dies but for the swans, peaceful life remains unchanged
Night Imagery

“All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight”

More than just time of day
Symbolize the end, or the time of death for him and/or his life

Questioning what will happen at the end

○ Times are always changing, it never stays the same
○ Time never stops as it keeps passing
Acceptance

- Poet recognizes that he is no longer the man he used to be
- Giving up mentality
- He is the twilight of his life
- Claims there will be a time where he will not be able to view the swans anymore
- Accepting his fate and passage of time
  - Pessimistic view and outlook on his life
Personification

Nature appears to be a friend and a foe to the speaker
- “Passion or conquest, wander where they will/Attend upon them still (23-24)
  - Found comfort in nature
  - Friend that changes over a period of time
  - Change reminds him of how time was passing quickly
Tone/Mood

++ Calming mood, still imagery
++ No strong emotions
  ○ “Mirrors a still sky” (4)
  ○ “But now they drift on the still water” (25)
++ Depressing tone towards change
++ Wanted things to stay the same
  ○ “And now my heart is sore” (14)
  ○ “Their hearts have not grown old” (22)
External Structures

+ 5 stanzas with 6 lines in each
+ Rhyme Scheme: ABCBDD
+ Interesting Meter
  ○ First 4 lines alternate with Iambic Tetrameter and Trimeter
  ○ 5th line is Iambic Pentameter
  ○ Causes a clear distinction between stanzas
Significance

+ Patriotism and love for Ireland
  ○ Idealized Ireland → beautiful swans with nature

+ Explores themes of love and nature in idealized Ireland through imagery.

+ However, swans remind him of his endless desolation and futile past love.
  ○ About realization that things change as time passes
  ○ Tone of reminiscent sadness
Discussion Questions

1. What is the purpose and message of the poem?
2. What aspects of modernism do you see in this poem?
3. Discuss the poem’s sequential progression of ideas. (ie. shifts)
4. What stood out to you? What do you think to be the focus of the poem?
5. What is the significance of the question in the final line?
Exit Slip

Choose one predominant usage of a literary technique.

What is its purpose and how does he achieve it?
“W. B. Yeats Biography.” Poets.org, Academy of American Poets, 16 Nov. 2017,
www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/w-b-yeats.

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www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43288/the-wild-swans-at-coole.